

What is Plato's *Apology*?

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Plato's *Apology* is to some degree a defence of the practice of philosophy, but it is primarily an explanation of Socrates' 'divine mission' and his closely related philosophic method. Socrates' rhetoric makes it clear from the start that his goal is not to save his life by defending himself against his accusers; he speaks at least in part to restore his own reputation and that of philosophy in general. Taken as a whole, however, his speech is best viewed not as a defence but as an offence, an attack on the ignorance of the people of Athens, and a final effort to achieve his divine mission.

Defending more than life

Socrates' direct, unconventional style suggests that the defence of his life is not the main concern of his speech. Its opening reveals how skilful he is with the spoken word; he says that he almost came to believe the words of his accusers themselves, as they spoke so well, and yet warns the jury not to trust their claim that he will himself speak persuasively to deceive them. Socrates then ironically explains that in fact their claim could be true, but only if by a convincing speaker they mean one who speaks the truth. His words emphasize the importance he places on truthfulness in both the *Apology* and in his wider life. In giving his belief that a good orator is one who speaks the truth, he is being entirely sincere; but it is this straightforwardness, combined with his irony, which so antagonizes the jurors, and indicates that Socrates is not trying to win their favour simply for the sake of his life. This is also evident later in his speech when he says he will produce as a witness the god at Delphi (μάρτυρα ὑμῖν παρέξομαι τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς, *Apol.* 20e7) – a bold and rather unorthodox claim to be made in court.

In context of the charge against him of impiety, this claim could be taken as either an effort to prove his faith or – as the jurors were likely to see it – a casual, irreverent reference to the gods. Socrates is serious, however; his intention is again to be true to himself, and not to endear himself to the jury. Another occasion where Socrates' rhetoric would have maddened the jury is when he compares the wisdom of well-respected but ignorant politicians to his own wisdom. The distinction he draws is

that he is wiser than them by 'a small measure' (σ μικρῷ τι, *Apol.* 21d6), in that he is aware of his ignorance, whereas they consider themselves wise, even though they are not. This seemingly modest remark is in fact bitterly ironic, as it is this crucial difference which causes Socrates, not the politicians, to be called by the oracle 'the wisest of men'. Socrates' irony together with what could be construed as his boastful claims would have been difficult elements of his speech for the jurors to accept. Nonetheless, as with all his other 'truthful' statements, Socrates speaks unconcerned by his audience's reaction. It is this use of rhetoric, and especially irony, which proves that Socrates' speech has a greater purpose than simply to defend his life.

Putting philosophy on the stand

The *Apology* does, however, act as a defence, and it is in part a defence of the practice of philosophy itself. At the time of Socrates' trial in 399 B.C., Athens was experiencing great political instability. Following the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 B.C., Athenian democracy had temporarily been overcome by an oligarchical regime led by the Thirty Tyrants. Democracy was restored in 403 B.C., but it was compromised; freedom of speech was no longer so great and there was suspicion of those holding views contrary to the democrats. It became harder for philosophers like Socrates to philosophize; Socrates found it especially difficult because, although he did not support the oligarchs, he had remained in Athens during their rule, and had friends – considered by others to be pupils – among the oligarchical faction.

Among these friends was Critias, the notorious leader of the Thirty. Socrates was also a friend of Alcibiades, who, during the Peloponnesian War, turned to the Spartans and became a traitor. In the *Apology*, he attempts to cleanse himself of accusations of supporting the oligarchs or Spartans; he refers in particular to the time when he was summoned by the Thirty to arrest Leon of Salamis, a man whom they wished to execute. Socrates refused on moral grounds, and suggests to the jury that he would have died for this choice had the oligarchy not soon been toppled. However, Socrates also addresses the

more general hostility towards philosophy at that time, by claiming that the arguments against him are standard stock, used against all philosophers who were seen to be destabilizing Athens. He says that the charges against him – investigating the 'phenomena above and below the ground' and 'not to believe in the gods' and 'to make the weaker argument the stronger' (τὰ μετέωρα καὶ τὰ ὑπὸ γῆς καὶ θεοὺς μὴ νομίζειν καὶ τὸν ἥττω λόγον κρείττω ποιεῖν, *Apol.* 23d5-6) – were being used simply to bring him to court so that his views might no longer be heard in public, where they were seen by his accusers to be threatening Athenian democracy. Among these contentious views was the opinion, supported by his own experiences, that politicians should be trained experts. The idea of rule by a few (oligarchy) is not very far away from this belief, and it was views like this which Socrates' accusers hoped to remove from public life. In Socrates' eyes, this would have been not just a personal attack but an attack on the practice of philosophy itself, and the frank and open discussion which had flourished in Athens before the Thirty's rule. Socrates' speech, then, encompasses a defence of both his own beliefs and the practice of philosophy.

Philosophers and sophists

Socrates, however, believed that the practice of philosophy was threatened by more than just politics; he distrusted the Sophists and thought that they posed a challenge to the reputation of philosophy. The Sophists were itinerant teachers who became particularly prevalent in Athens in the fifth century B.C. They claimed both to possess wisdom and teach wisdom, which went directly against Socrates' most fundamental beliefs. Nonetheless, he was regarded by some as the supreme Sophist because he was able to defeat them in argument, a skill for which they became famous. They enjoyed popularity in Athens for a time because Athenian public life centred so heavily on the spoken word, and, by offering to teach rhetoric and other wisdom for a fee, they seemed to provide a straightforward route to success. However, they became notorious for 'making the weaker argument stronger', which, as seen above, is a phrase much repeated in the *Apology*, where Socrates

frequently tries to distinguish himself from the Sophists.

In short, the practice of philosophy seemed to Socrates to have been besmirched by the Sophists, whose skills of persuasion and belief in moral relativism caused a decrease in their popularity following the Peloponnesian War. Many people confused the state of being at a loss (ἀπορία), which was induced by Socrates' method of philosophizing, with the deception and manipulation of the Sophists, which Socrates believed was a large reason for the unpopularity of the philosophers (as opposed to the Sophists). Socrates refers in particular to Aristophanes' caricature of him as a Sophist in *Clouds*: 'you yourselves saw these things in the comedy of Aristophanes,' he tells the jurors, 'some Socrates there swinging around' (ταῦτα γὰρ ἐωρᾶτε καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν τῇ Ἀριστοφάνους κωμῳδίᾳ, Σωκράτη τινὰ ἐκεῖ περιφερόμενον, *Apol.* 19c3). Socrates suggests that it is here that the public stereotype of philosophers as untruthful and motivated by success has emerged. He proceeds to point out the crucial differences between himself and the Sophists: he does not charge a fee and as a result lives in 'infinite poverty' (ἐν πενίᾳ μυρία εἰμί, *Apol.* 23b9); furthermore, he believes emphatically in his lack of wisdom, rather than his possession of it and ability to teach it to others. Socrates therefore focuses for a significant part of his speech on defending both himself and other true philosophers from confusion with their antithesis, the Sophists.

A divine mission

The most important part of the *Apology*, however, is not to act as a defence, but to explain and illustrate the 'divine mission' which became the centre of Socrates' life. He describes how his mission was inspired by the oracle at Delphi and the prophecy 'that there was no one wiser [than Socrates]' (μηδένα σοφώτερον εἶναι, *Apol.* 21a7). Socrates says that he set out to refute the God, because he was conscious of his own great ignorance; however, as he discovered the truth of the God's words, his mission evolved into two key parts: to reveal to man the worthlessness of human wisdom, and to encourage the improvement of the soul by self-exa-

mination. This mission required the development of Socrates' famous philosophic method, where he assumed (sincerely) a position of ignorance, and then questioned others, aiming to reveal to them the inconsistencies in their beliefs and to provoke in them further examination of their soul and way of life.

This method of examination in dialogue is known as *elenchus* (ἐλέγχος). It is fitting that the inscription 'know thyself' (γνῶθι σεαυτόν), which so concisely expresses Socrates' mission, was written in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Socrates describes his mission as a 'pilgrimage' and refers to his 'labours': 'I must reveal my pilgrimage as I toiled at such labours,' he says, in a direct comparison of himself to Hercules (δεῖ δὴ ὑμῖν τὴν ἐμὴν πλάνην ἐπιδείξαι ὥσπερ πόνους τινὰς πονοῦντος, *Apol.* 22a7). Although comparing himself to the young and handsome Hercules was obviously meant to be humorous, it might not have been construed as such by the jurors, who were presumably ready to seize on any instances of impiety displayed by Socrates. His explanation of the mission as a whole would have astonished the audience, as it is based on a topic in which it would be difficult to sound modest.

When referring to his own wisdom in comparison to that of the people he questions (the politicians, poets, and craftsmen), Socrates' tone could easily sound proud and patronizing; he himself acknowledges that he became hated for placing well-known politicians in a state of embarrassment: 'After this, I went on in succession, perceiving that I was disliked, but nevertheless it seemed necessary to treat the God's business as very important' (μετὰ ταῦτ' οὖν ἤδη ἐφεξῆς ἦα, αἰσθανόμενος μὲν καὶ λυπούμενος καὶ δεδιὼς ὅτι ἀπηχθάνομην, ὅμως δὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐδόκει εἶναι τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ περὶ πλείστου ποιέσθαι, *Apol.* 21e2). Socrates realizes that the ultimate threat to his life comes from his divine mission and resulting philosophic method, and yet these are so central to his way of life that he cannot relinquish them, not even for the sake of his life. He later states that, were he to be acquitted on the condition that he gave up philosophizing, he would rather face death, because of the importance of his mission not just to him but to all men. This reaches the core of the *Apology*, and

shows that Socrates' purpose is not a defence, whether of his beliefs or of philosophy in general, but rather a continuation of his divine mission and closely intertwined philosophic method into the last moments of his life.

Conclusion

Plato's *Apology* should be viewed only in part as a defence of Socrates' life and beliefs. Socrates' irony and skilled rhetoric show that his intention is not at least acquittal, but that he has a deeper purpose. Set within its historical context, his speech could be viewed as a defence of his philosophic beliefs, or, indeed, a defence of philosophy in general against the threats of political instability and the Sophists. However, from Socrates' bold addresses to the audience, the *Apology* appears really to be an explanation of the motivation behind his divine mission and the method of philosophy which necessarily results from it, both of which have dominated his later life. Socrates hopes – though in vain, as he admits – to show the jury the real value of human wisdom, and to encourage his listeners to seek virtue and the perfection of their souls by self-examination. This, which incorporates a defence of Socrates' life and beliefs, is the real intent behind his speech in the *Apology*.

Anna Drummond Young attends Wycombe Abbey, where her teachers are extremely proud of her achievement. Mr Simon Johns wrote: 'She put a huge amount of effort and thought into her Plato essay, and it is terrific that she has received the award as a result. It is a great honour, too, for her essay to be published in Omnibus'.